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## **Presence of The Vincentians In West Kalimantan, Indonesia**

*Stefanus Prio Oetomo, C.M.*

As *Vincentiana* has asked me to contribute a piece with regard to our presence in Kalimantan, I decided to narrate our own concrete experiences rather than to put forward an article based on historical research. Hoping that this may give a real glimpse of our humble presence, this decision is made simply by reason of my personal limitations to do such a scientific research.

KALIMANTAN or, in western expression, BORNEO is the biggest among more than 17,000 islands in the archipelago of Indonesia. Kalimantan is giant, green and, in a certain sense, virgin as well. It is green because most of its regions are covered with wild forest. It is also virgin since the majority of its regions have not yet been touched and polluted by so-called modernism. There are still very few people who occupy it. The condition of human life is still traditional, not yet modernized. Recently, Kalimantan became famous all over the world for several reasons. One of them was the disastrous fire burning its green and large forest. That fire produced haze suffocating the people in the surrounding regions.

We are ten Vincentian missionaries working in West Kalimantan, in the diocese of Sintang. We work with and in the midst of the native people, the tribe of DAYAK. The people of Dayak had already settled in this giant island hundreds of years ago. The majority of the Dayak people live in the interior regions of the island, which are mostly forest. Some of them use motorcycles for transportation. For transport on the rivers they use a small ship or speed boat (a boat powered by a small diesel motor).

The Dayak people have different sub-tribes with various languages. They believe in the spirits of ancestors, magic powers, dreams, and magicians or, in their traditional expression, *dukun-dukun*. Their lives are in the shadow of the magical powers of a powerful being who, in their own traditional belief, governs and judges everybody according to his or her deeds.

Their traditional feasts are always accompanied by drinking and eating much to their heart's content. A common characteristic of the Dayak's feast is typically associated with the usage of the blood of the animal slaughtered to purify themselves and their hunting instruments. They believe that by doing so they can protect their life from the black spirits which disturb them. In fact, the Dayak people are afraid of some kinds of black spirits.

Now, in Kalimantan the people of Dayak are identified with the Christians. They are commonly recognized as either Catholics or Protestants, distinguished from other people who are mostly Moslems. It should be noted that 80% among more than two hundred million people of Indonesia are Moslems. Only six percent of Indonesians are Christians.

Regions where the Vincentian missionaries are working are located on the far side of a big river, Melawi. That is in the very interior of the giant island. We serve some parishes, such as Nanga Pinoh, Nanga Ella, Menukung, Nanga Serawai and Nanga Ambalau. Catholic missions in these regions began only about 50 years ago. Because of the recent evangelization, the Catholic faith embraced by the people of Dayak is not yet well-rooted.

This new Christian faith confronts the traditional beliefs which have already existed for hundreds of years and have been held strongly by the people. This is the concrete challenge for the Christian faith. The challenge is all the more serious for us when we consider the real conditions of parishes in which we work. There are many big parishes which are handled only by a priest and a catechist. Besides, the people have problems of living associated with poverty, poor quality education, poor health care. There are also side-effects of industrialization and modernism which are now starting to invade and pollute the innocence of their traditional way of life. Industrialization in Kalimantan is related to plywood produced by the forests, whereas modernism alludes to the arrival of parabolic antennas for television.

The Congregation of the Mission began its first mission in 1976 when the Vincentian missionaries from France, Switzerland and the United States were expelled from Vietnam by the communists. After having been driven out of Vietnam, they moved to Indonesia and entered the jungle of Kalimantan. They considered that the culture and natural conditions of Kalimantan were more or less similar to those of Vietnam. The coming of these Vincentian missionaries was and is considered as an immense grace for both the local Church, the diocese of Sintang, and the Congregation of the Mission of the province of Indonesia.

"I have come so that they may have life, and have it to the full" (Jn 10:10b). In our experience of the mission in West Kalimantan, we believe that we are called to partake in the spirit of Jesus Christ as the good shepherd. Jesus wants to satisfy everyone who comes to Him. He gives not mere words but also bread to those who hunger and thirst, freedom to the oppressed, consolation to the distressed, sight to the blind. Following this example of Christ, the Vincentian missionaries in West Kalimantan do not merely deliver homilies in the pulpit, give conferences or teach catechism in class, say the Mass or celebrate other sacraments in the church. Rather, we also touch and work in all aspects of human life. We take care of the sick, help the poor, teach the ignorant, defend them against injustice and so forth. In sum, we strive to apply a new integral evangelization, in accordance with the local situation, the interior regions of Kalimantan.

Some years ago, when a public health center (a governmental organization that is in charge of the health of the people) did not yet exist, our missionaries could not help but play the role of "medical doctor" as well, bringing medicine and curing the sick. When the sick people need further serious treatment, we take them to the cities, such as Nanga Pinoh or Pontianak or even Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia. At Nanga Pinoh, a town where we set up the center of our mission, we have constructed the "Wisma Husada," a kind of small hospital, used for curing and treating the sick of tuberculosis and skin illness. For sustaining the activities of "Wisma Husada" and curing the sick we have many expenses.

St. Vincent told his priests that the duty of a priest is to evangelize the poor in villages. But, if we abandon charity, evangelization is not complete. Similarly, delivering a conference to the Daughters of Charity, he said that though their main task is to give service to the poor, evangelization should not be abandoned. If they neglect evangelization, their service of charity is not complete. We, the Vincentian missionaries in West Kalimantan, strive to concretize the integration of evangelization and charity in our mission to the Dayak people.

We work in poor parishes. Each one of them has about 40 villages that are regions of that parish. Mostly, villages are visited by a speed boat or on foot. Since distances from one village to another are tens of kilometers, our missionaries need days to walk by foot in visiting the parishioners. In every village we teach catechism to adults, youth, and children. We celebrate the sacraments of reconciliation and the holy Eucharist. Because the region is large and difficult, we can visit a village usually only two times a year. That means that a village has the celebration of the holy Eucharist only two times a year!

With regard to activities of Christian faith, the people in the villages are not merely dependent on the missionaries, but also on the volunteers who are available to be leaders in every village. Most of them have graduated only from elementary or secondary school. Nevertheless, they have good will and availability to serve the people in their village. For their formation, we organize courses in leadership, liturgical celebrations, and simple lessons for giving a homily or spiritual reflections. The task of a missionary here is difficult enough, since he himself and a catechist must deliver the material for courses. Besides, the difficulties arise from the fact that human resources in the interior regions of Kalimantan are not yet well explored. By giving these courses, however, we hope that the leaders may be more capable to handle the celebration of the word of God, to help people in preparation for a wedding celebration, and so forth in their own villages.

Compared with other regions in Indonesia, the quality of education in the interior regions of West Kalimantan in general and in the zone of the Vincentian missionaries on the far side of the river Melawi in particular, is still quite poor. There are so many children who do not finish their elementary school, so many young people do not have the skills of reading, writing and counting. This miserable situation is understandable, since many elementary schools have only two teachers for

six classes! Moreover, the effective times for studying are supposed to be four hours in school, but in reality they are reduced to only two hours. This has been going on for years in the interior regions of Kalimantan. What will become of our children in the future?

We strive to encourage the children to go to the school, but we often fail, because they do not want to go for many reasons: they do not want to be separated from their own parents in villages; they do not have enough money; they just want to help their parents work, and so on. Thus, when we are successful in sending a young man to school, we take care of his expenses. This does not mean that we do this because he is intelligent or good at studying. Rather, we do it simply because he is available to go to school. We have spent much money for this charity, but still not always successful.

Aside from sending a young man to the school, another project we have developed to advance elementary education is to create small schools, a group of informal studies in villages. In this project, we look for some teachers to run them and teach the young people. This project is connected with the fact that some villages do not have any school. For instance, in Nanga Pinoh parish there are 10 out of 40 villages in which there is no elementary school. This situation indicates that there are many school age children who do not go to school. To resolve this immense problem, we look for volunteers to teach these children.

The majority of the Dayak people live from the so-called "moving fields." They cultivate fields without possessing them, as they move from one place to another. They open forest, cut big plants, burn them. When the rainy season comes, they plant rice. Such is their way of life. Every year they move from one place or forest to another. However, as the times change, such a way of life changes gradually as well. Now, large forests that "belong to" them are in the hands of other rich people who come to explore natural sources and build industries of plywood. Their fields are divided and bought by these rich people for a cheap price. Consequently, they are not free to farm anymore. Their forests, their homes are invaded and dominated by other people. The Dayak people are in great difficulty. They are oppressed, abandoned, cast aside.

We strive to educate the Dayak people to leave behind their old way of life and live in a new way. We urge them to settle in one place, cultivating their own fields and persevering in planting rice. Instruments for cultivating, tractors, animals, houses, and other necessities are also provided for them. They can use them gratuitously. We deliver some courses on how to hoe and plow the fields, to plant rice, and so forth. Such a program has lasted for ten years already, but it has not yet fully succeeded. We, however, need the grace of patience. As missionaries, we must be patient when facing a new mentality and culture different from our own. It is very true that to be good missionaries we need more and more the grace of God.

A part from working in the midst of the Dayak people, we serve the diocese of Sintang also by handling the priestly formation. The diocese has both a major and a minor seminary. The minor seminary, founded four years ago by one of our missionaries, has now 51 students. The qualities of faith, intellect, education and vocation of the seminarians are still not ranked high. We must understand and consider their quality in an integral background of the whole condition of life in the very interior regions of West Kalimantan, which are nothing other than jungle. Vocation is a response of faith. So, when faith is still young and not profound, we must strive to hoe, plow and make it fertile so that it grows, blooms, and gives fruits of vocation.

As the times change, the condition of human life for the Dayak people is changing as well. The interior regions of West Kalimantan, in spite of being isolated in terms of modernism, are now being invaded and polluted by the so-called globalization and sophisticated communication. Now, televisions with parabolic antenna are coming into the jungle. This means that the Dayak people are facing new challenges. Their strong and genuine culture, which they have lived for more than a hundred years, is now at stake.

The Vincentian missionaries, anticipating the side-effects of modernism for the Dayak people, are constructing a VTC (Vincentian Training Centre) at Nanga Pinoh. At the end of 1997 we began to create houses for this project. The VTC will be a place for courses or a center of formation for the leaders of the Catholic people. We propose that in the VTC we can hold spiritual retreats, a school of evangelisation, or some courses on practical skills for the youth, such as repairing motorcycles, carpentry, and so on.

We are grateful to the benefactors who sustain financially this proposal of building the VTC in particular and our common projects of the mission in general. We hope that this VTC will be useful for helping some of the Dayak people to be more capable of decision-making with regard to their life, facing the modern challenges of the time. Besides, we hope that they may be bright and smart enough to look for occasions of business amid the difficult situations that they face. With regard to their faith, we expect that they may know Christ more profoundly and that their faith may be rooted deeply in their culture and mentality. In realizing this project, humbly we join with the spirit of the good shepherd of Christ, that "they may have life, and have it to the full."

Living with the poor, collaborating with them, working with them, serving or, better yet, loving them are something not easy. We need a solid and firm basis of personal experience of union with Christ. Serving the poor is not easy, especially when we are hindered, for some unexpected reason, from finding Christ who is present in them. However, in our own experience, we strive to hold firmly that "insofar as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me and.... ... insofar as you neglected to do this to one of the least of them, you neglected to do it to me...." (Mt 25:39, 45). In arriving at the experience of such contemplation,

that is, finding Christ in the poor whom we serve, we learn what it mean by *kenosis* (Phil 2:6-11). As Vincentian missionaries, we should be courageous in emptying and humbling ourselves so as to have space for the poor in our heart.

The very ideal of our humble presence as the Vincentian missionaries in West Kalimantan is nothing other than Christ himself, the good shepherd and the genuine evangelizer of the poor. Our presence, thus, is simply a bid for participation in realizing Christ's redemptive will; i.e., that they, the Dayak people, may have life and have it in abundance.

(Translated by: F. X. E. Armada Riyanto, CM)